A Guide to Low-Risk Drinking

What is Low Risk Drinking?

Low-risk drinking involves limiting alcohol use to amounts and patterns that are unlikely to cause harm to oneself or others. Scientific evidence indicates that the risk of harm increases significantly when people consume more than two drinks per day and more than five days per week. Because different types of alcoholic beverages contain different amounts of alcohol, it is important that you know what a standard drink is when you are cutting down or trying to stick to a limit. In the box below, you can see that standard drinks of different beverages are different sizes. But what they have in common, is that each of them contains about 10 grams of pure alcohol. The following can be used as a guide to help you keep track of your drinking. **Remember, each is a standard drink.**

Light Beer	Full Strength Beer	Wine	Port/Sherry	Spirits
1 glass-425ml	1 glass-285ml	1 glass-100ml	1 glass-60ml	1 nip 30ml
2.9% alcohol	**4.9% alcohol**	**12% alcohol**	**20% alcohol**	**40% alcohol**

Many individuals who would otherwise regard themselves as moderate drinkers, at times drink in ways that cause problems. For example, limiting alcohol use to two or fewer drinks a day may present risks in certain circumstances:

- When driving or operating machinery
- When taking certain medications
- If you cannot control your drinking
- If you suffer from depression or anxiety
- When pregnant or breast feeding
- If you have certain medical conditions
- If you have a personal history of drinking problems
- If you have been told not to drink for legal reasons

What is High-Risk Drinking?

Some people may think that you have to drink heavily all of the time or be dependent on alcohol to have alcohol-related problems. This is not true. Some problems can come from simply being drunk every now and again. Other problems may come from regularly drinking too much even though you may hardly ever get drunk. You may be surprised that alcohol problems occur at what you consider to be moderate levels of drinking. You increase your risks of experiencing alcohol related problems if you drink to the point of intoxication (being drink), drink on a regular basis, or spend a lot of time drinking.

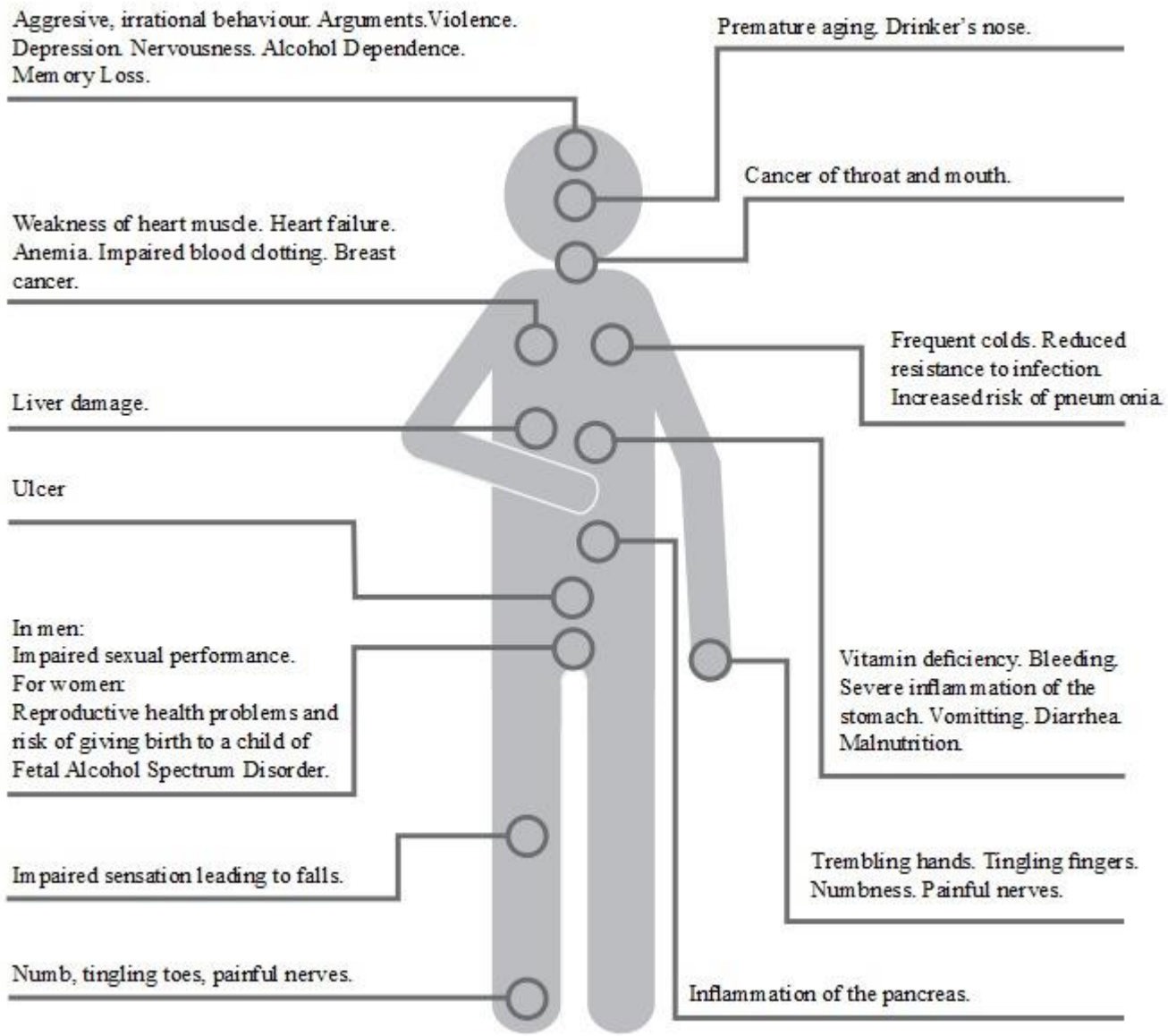
Risks due to intoxication (that is, being drunk). You do not have to be “falling down drunk”, nor do you have to drink often to have these problems. Examples of intoxication related problems include drunken driving, falls, hangovers, unsafe sex, arguments, absenteeism, and embarrassment. The problems can range from being minor to being fatal.

Risks due to regular use. Problems coming from drinking too much on a regular basis include: spending too much money on alcohol, concentration and memory difficulties, experiencing stomach and liver disorders, diabetes, poor sleeping habits, gaining weight, and conflict in your relationships.

Risks due to dependence. Some people begin to devote more and more time to drinking and feel uncomfortable if they don't drink. They may feel alcohol is beginning to take over their lives, and cutting down their drinking becomes harder. Dependence can mean anxiety, depression, withdrawal symptoms, losing interest in other activities and feelings of loss of control.

Physical Effects of High Risk Drinking

In addition to the above mentioned risks, individuals who drink more than two standard drinks are likely to experience a number of physiological effects from alcohol, some of which may lead to physical difficulties. The following diagram outlines the effects of high risk drinking.



Indications of High-Risk Drinking

High-risk drinkers may have difficulty recognizing the problematic nature of their drinking. They may minimize the amount of alcohol they drink or simply ignore the fact that the amount of alcohol they drink is excessive. At times it may be helpful to consider looking for common signs of high-risk drinking. Some indications of high-risk drinking include:

- Drinking alone when you feel angry or sad
- Being late or absent from work due to the effects of alcohol
- Friends or family have indicated they are concerned about your drinking
- Drinking even after telling yourself you won't
- Forgetting what you did while you were drinking
- Periods of headaches or a hang-over after drinking
- Past failed attempts to decrease your alcohol use

How to Manage Your Drinking

Reading about the risks associated with high-risk drinking has hopefully changed how you think about your own and others drinking habits. After reading this material you may want to change your drinking habits in some way, but are not exactly sure how. Many people change their behavior all on their own. Often, when they are asked what brought about the change, they say they just "thought about it," meaning they evaluated the consequences of their current behavior and of changing before making a final decision. You can do the same thing by asking two simple questions: "What do I stand to lose and gain by continuing my current drinking pattern?" and "What do I stand to lose and gain by changing my drinking pattern?" To change, the scale needs to tip so the costs outweigh the benefits. This is called Decisional Balancing. Weighing the pros and cons of changing happens all the time. For example, when changing jobs or deciding to move or get married. At some point, you may have received real benefits from the behavior you want to change, such as relaxation, fun, or stress reduction. However, because you are reading this, you are considering both the benefits and the costs. Below is an example of a Decisional Balance Worksheet for someone wanting to change the amount of alcohol they drink.

Decisional Balance Worksheet		
	Changing	Not Changing
Benefits of	• *Increased control over my life* • *Support from family and friends* • *Decreased job problems* • Improved health & finances my problems	• *More relaxed* • *More fun at parties* • Don't have to think about my problems

Costs of	• *Increased stress/anxiety* • *Feel more depressed* • *Increased boredom* • Sleeping problems	• *Disapproval from friends/family* • *Money problems* • *Damage close relationships* • Increased health risks

Now that you have seen an example of a Decisional Balance for someone else thinking about changing their drinking behaviors, consider what the personal costs and benefits of changing (and not changing) your drinking behaviors are to you. Write down the costs and benefits in the worksheet below:

Decisional Balance Worksheet		
	Changing	Not Changing
Benefits of		
Costs of		

Decision to Change Worksheet: Look over what you have written. What do you feel is the best choice for you? If you have made the decision to change your drinking behavior, it is often helpful to refer back to this worksheet to remind yourself why you made the decision to change. It is also a good idea to talk it over with the person you are closest to so that they can fully understand why you have chosen your goal. Then they will find it easier to be supportive of your attempts to change. All change can be uncomfortable at first, so it helps to get support from others. Research shows support from others will increase your chances for success.

Identifying Triggers

Although we sometimes do things that are not good for us, there are usually reasons why we behave in certain ways. An important step in trying to change a behavior is identifying why it occurs. Frequently behaviors are triggers by other things. Many circumstances can act as triggers, such as pleasant or unpleasant emotions, a particular setting, or just a routine situation. To help you identify possible triggers for your drinking consider the following questions:

- With whom do you typically drink?
- What do you hope will happen when you drink?
- Are you in any particular emotional state when you drink (e.g., angry, depressed, happy, sad)?

- What physical state are you in when you drink (e.g., relaxed, tense, tired, aroused)?
- What setting do you tend to drink in (e.g. work, party, ex-spouse's house)?
- What activities are you involved with when drinking (e.g., work, playing sports, watching TV)

My Triggers for Drinking

Take a few moments to note your common triggers for drinking. Finish each of the sentences below:

1. The places where I most frequently drink alcohol are:_____
2. The people I am usually with when I drink include:_____
3. I usually drink when I am feeling:_____
4. I frequently drink when doing the following activities:_____
5. Situations where I typically do not drink are:_____

Change Plan

Now that you have identified some of your personal drinking triggers, you have determined those situations in which you might drink a lot. The next step is to figure out how to be in these situations and experience those feelings without a drink in your hand. Can you avoid the situation altogether? Or find a way of handling it without a drink? Or with only one drink instead of half a dozen?

Rather than waiting until you are under pressure, work out some strategies for managing your drinking before you get into these situations. You'll feel more in control if you have prepared for a difficult "triggering" situation. To help you accomplish this go through the steps outlined below.

First, pick one of your "triggers".

Example: Going to the Club with friends

Second, think of as many ways you can for handling that situation and write them all down. Be creative—try to put down some ideas you have never tried before, no matter how silly some of them seem.

Example:

1. Ask friends to keep me from drinking
2. Don't go to the club
3. Go someplace that doesn't serve alcohol
4. Don't bring any extra money

Third, review your list and consider how these strategies might not work. Then figure out ways to work around these obstacles. Determine if you need to alter the option in some way.

Example: If I don't bring any money, I will just ask a friend to spot me. Maybe I should ask them not to do this beforehand.

Fourth, read your list carefully and pick the **two** ideas that seem the most practical and sensible for that situation.

Example: Don't bring extra money and ask friends not to loan me any money.

Fifth, try out the most promising strategies and see if they work. If they don't, go back to step 2 and think of other ideas. It is important to recognize that some of these ideas may not work, (e.g., it may be tempting fate to say you will go to the pub and only drink orange juice). Thus, it is important to establish realistic and achievable strategies. Use the next page to work out these steps. If you need help, your BHC can assist you.

My Personal Change Plan

Step 1

Choose a trigger: _____

Step 2

Write down as many strategies for controlling your drinking in this setting:

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Step 3

Think of how the strategies in Step 2 might fail, then consider ways to work around these obstacles:

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Step 4

Look at what you have in Step 3, and choose the two that seem the most doable:

1. _____
2. _____

Step 5

Test your strategies from Step 4 to see if they work. If not, start over at Step 2 to figure out new ways to make them work given what you have learned. Ask your BHC for help, if needed.

Make as many copies of this worksheet as necessary until you find a successful strategy. Most people will fill one out for each of their triggering situations. The more worksheets you complete, the more thinking and planning you end up doing, which makes you more prepared to make a behavior change.

This page has been intentionally left blank. Please proceed to the next section on the following page.